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**JAMES HENLEY THORNWELL**

*Presbyterian Defender of the Old South*

BY THE

REV. PAUL LESLIE GARBER, PH. D.,  
*Pastor of the Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church,  
Durham, North Carolina.*

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## I. BIOGRAPHICAL

In the eighty years since his death no Southerner has contributed as much to American Presbyterianism as did James Henley Thornwell. His life spanned an inter-war period in American history, 1812-1862. He was born December 9, 1812 on a plantation in Marlborough District, South Carolina, the second of four children. His father was an English-born plantation overseer and manager, a man who provided well for his family. James' mother was of Welsh Baptist stock. Her staunch Calvinistic faith during the years of privation the family knew after the father's death, December 30, 1820, together with the refined character of the home James knew during the first eight years of his life, left indelible marks upon the later thought of the first-born son.

James' first formal education was begun in an "old field" school under a respected classical scholar, Peter McIntyre. Sharing McIntyre's interest in young Thornwell's intellectual precocity were two wealthy residents of the neighborhood, General James Gillespie, an elderly planter, and William H. Robbins, a promising young lawyer of Cheraw, who together financed his further education. For a time Robbins himself was Thornwell's tutor. Later

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<sup>1</sup>The introductory portion of a thesis, "The Religious Thought of James Henley Thornwell," submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Duke University, Durham, N. C., 1939.

the boy was enrolled in a private academy in Cheraw to complete his college preparation.

In January, 1830, Thornwell became a member of the junior class at South Carolina College (now the University of South Carolina). His studies there were classical in nature. Most of his courses were in Greek and Roman literature and the rudiments of philosophy. He acquired the reputation of being the college's outstanding student debater. It was with first honors in his class that he graduated in December, 1831.

Thornwell remained at the college for a while after graduation in a financially unprofitable experiment with tutoring. He wanted to continue his studies in the classics, but for financial reasons he was forced to accept appointment as principal of the Cheraw academy, where he remained for two years, 1832-1834. In this period Thornwell made confession of his faith and united with the Presbyterian church.

The materials available are adequate for only a partial account of Thornwell's adolescent religious development. At thirteen years of age he is reported to have defended his mother's Calvinism against a kinsman's Methodist Arminianism. When he was seventeen he stated that the way for him "to glorify God" was by following the profession of a theologian. His fellow-students at the college thought his talents pointed to the practice of law, to which profession his benefactors, Gillespie and Robbins, had also urged him. But Thornwell's aim at that time was to be a man of letters. His decision to enter the ministry evidently was made simultaneously with his affiliation with the Presbyterian church, for on December 2, 1833, the Presbytery of Harmony received Thornwell as a candidate for the ministry. Just how Thornwell's attention was drawn to the Westminster Confession of Faith may not be definitely known, but there is little doubt that he was led to the Presbyterian Church and to its ministry by his personal study of this body's doctrinal standard. The following summer he went to Andover, Massachusetts, to begin his seminary education. After a brief stay he removed to Harvard, where for six weeks he studied

privately in Divinity Hall. Ill-health forced him to return to South Carolina.

Thornwell had planned to enter the senior class in the theological seminary at Columbia. But, as there was a current scarcity of ministers, within a month after his return to South Carolina Thornwell was licensed by his Presbytery and, in the spring of 1835, was ordained and installed as pastor of the newly organized church at Lancaster. He served this parish for almost three years, during which time he began to take his place in the courts of the Church.

In December, 1835, Thornwell married the sister of his college classmate, James H. Witherspoon, Nancy White Witherspoon. She was a grandniece of John Witherspoon, Presbyterian minister and president of the College of New Jersey, the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence.

Thornwell left Lancaster to begin his duties as a professor at South Carolina College in January, 1838. He was to serve his *alma mater* for the next eighteen years save for two short pastoral intervals. He was professor of rhetoric and *belles lettres* for two years. From 1841 to 1851 he was chaplain and Professor of Sacred Literature and Evidences of Christianity. In 1852 he was made president of the college, which position he held until 1856. From 1856 to his death in 1862 Thornwell was Professor of Systematic Theology at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Columbia.

Two of his colleagues on the faculty at the college later acquired national reputations. Francis Lieber, the political scientist, was on familiar terms with Thornwell until 1855, when, Lieber charged, Thornwell's religious bigotry defeated his election to the college's presidency. Joseph LeConte, one of South Carolina's famous men of science, recorded in his autobiography that Thornwell was one whose society at Columbia had stimulated his intellectual activity.

The scope of Thornwell's accomplishments within the brief fifty years of his life is remarkably significant. Certain of his boyhood aspirations were fulfilled in startling fashion. He confessed that from his earliest self-reflection the ambition to be a man of learning had worked like a passion within him. At a dinner party in New York in 1856 Professor George Bancroft of Harvard pre-

sented Thornwell a fine copy of Aristotle's works on the fly-leaf of which he had inscribed in Latin, "A testimonial of regard to the Rev. J. H. Thornwell, the most learned of the learned." In college days Thornwell's hope was that he should be a man of letters who should not die unsung like a beast in the field. He left the world of scholarly research four large volumes of his writings, another of his letters and other printed articles and several manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> His ambition to be a theologian, conceived at the age of seventeen, defined itself in 1834 at Harvard: "I wish to establish a literary character in my native state: for I have an eye on a Professorship in the Theological Seminary at Columbia." When he died it was to his influence more than to the influence of any other one man that this institution owed its national reputation.

## II. CHANNELS OF THORNWELL'S INFLUENCE

Thornwell's religious thought was most popularly known through his preaching. On his journeys to various points in the United States as a commissioner to General Assemblies, and on repeated trips through the South and Southwest, he preached to large congregations. Yet he was not a preacher for the masses. His language was too academic and his arguments were too closely knit in Aristotelian logic for them. Not that his preaching was cold and unemotional. As he wrestled with problems, and as he expounded his convictions of truth and error, his enthusiasm mounted. Once when he was preaching in Charleston on the Last Judgment, it is recorded, "the whole congregation appeared terror-stricken and unconsciously seized the backs of the pews." A young man present on the occasion testified that "he was never so frightened in all his life."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>J. B. Adger and J. L. Girardeau, eds. *The Collected Writings of J. H. Thornwell, D. D., LL. D.* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1871-1873), 4 vols.; B. M. Palmer, *The Life and Letters of J. H. Thornwell, D. D., LL. D.* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1875). Most of the extant mss. are to be found in the Historical Foundation, Montreal, N. C., and in the University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, N. C.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas H. Law in the *Centennial Addresses* (Spartanburg, S. C.: Band-White, 1913), p. 16.

Dr. Addison Alexander, professor at Princeton Seminary, said of one of Thornwell's General Assembly sermons that it was "as fine a specimen of Demosthenian eloquence as he had ever heard from the pulpit, and that it realized his idea of what preaching should be." John C. Calhoun in 1843 compared Thornwell to his teacher at Yale, Timothy Dwight, and commented on Thornwell's thorough acquaintance with topics generally familiar only to statesmen. After having heard Thornwell at South Carolina College in 1847, Daniel Webster is reported to have exclaimed: "Greatest pulpit orator I have ever heard." As a preacher Thornwell was to the South of his day what Charles Hodge or Albert W. Barnes was to Presbyterians of the North.

Through his active participation in the official life of the Presbyterian Church during a critical period of its history, Thornwell's religious thought had a wider influence than has often been credited to him. He attended Synod first in 1836, a time when the break between the Old School and New School parties was beginning to manifest itself as irrepressible. He attended General Assembly for the first time in 1837, when that schism was consummated. By the time of his next Assembly, 1845, his reputation had been made by his writings. From that year he was named a commissioner to almost half the Assemblies held during his lifetime. In 1847 he was elected Moderator of the General Assembly, the youngest man before or since to hold that high office. He was thirty-four years old. In all of the Assemblies he attended after 1845 he was a prominent figure, being named to important committees and commissions and being invited several times to preach before that national body. All of the Southern Presbyterians and many of the Northern members of that Church probably would have agreed with Henry Ward Beecher's comment: "By common fame, Dr. Thornwell was the most brilliant minister in the Old School Presbyterian Church, and the most brilliant debater in the General Assembly. This reputation he early gained and never lost. Whenever he was present in the Assembly, he was always the first person pointed out to a stranger."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>First printed in *The Independent*. Quoted in Jos. M. Wilson, ed., *The Presbyterian Almanac for 1863*, pp. 211-212.

Although he confessed to Rev. Robert J. Breckinridge, his intimate friend, an aversion to writing, Thornwell left posterity sufficient evidence that the influence of his religious thinking through the printed page was considerable. His early magazine articles appeared in religious publications edited by Breckinridge. In 1846 he joined B. M. Palmer and John B. Adger in establishing *The Southern Presbyterian Review*. The prospectus for the quarterly indicated that it was to be partly literary and partly theological in character. Its purposes were to expound and defend the doctrines and polity of the Presbyterian Church, to devote no small amount of its pages to controversies with Roman Catholic and Protestant heresies and to propound the principles of a sound moral philosophy. During the fifteen years between the establishment of this quarterly and his death, Thornwell supplied it with twenty-five major articles. He was, according to a later editor of the magazine, "Its main pillar; . . . he . . . did more to give it reputation than any other regular contributor, or, possibly, than all other contributors combined." Certain of his articles were sharply polemic in tone—against Romanism, against "novelties" in Presbyterian polity, against heretical theologies and against infidel philosophies. Many of these were in the form of book reviews. Others concerned current topics of debate in church circles. Some of the later ones had important political implications. Some were sermons. Excerpts from some of these articles were reprinted by a number of the religious weekly newspapers then circulated throughout the South.

*The Southern Quarterly Review* was established in 1842 under the editorship of William Gilmore Simms. During the 1850's, through Simms' friendship with the Virginia Tory, Beverley Tucker, the journal acquired a political reputation. In 1856, when financially the magazine was ready to collapse, Thornwell assumed its editorship. He issued three numbers, April and August, 1856, and February, 1857, before, through lack of patronage, the publication came to its undeserved end. In those three issues Thornwell had five articles,—a review-essay on American higher education, an essay in memory of his professor of philosophy, Robert Henry, an essay on Plato's philosophy, a review-essay on miracles and a series of brief reviews.



During his lifetime Thornwell published certain of his critical articles and sermons in book form. The one on the validity of the Apocrypha, 1844, was his part of a series of heated articles exchanged with a Roman Catholic priest of Charleston on that subject. The other, *Discourses on Truth*, 1855, was a series of sermon-essays which he delivered as chaplain of South Carolina College.

It was one of Thornwell's youthful dreams to do something concerning what he considered the deplorable state of Southern literature. In 1836 his Synod named him on a committee to investigate the possibilities of establishing a Southern theological review. In his writings noted above he did his share toward fulfilling these dreams and thereby also widened measurably the circle of influence for his own thought.

Not much is known concerning Thornwell's activities in secular politics. Nevertheless the influence of some social aspects of his religious thought in this regard is worthy of note.

There are three institutions in whose traditions Thornwell's thought was implanted. The University of South Carolina honors the name of Thornwell with a scholarship and a dormitory. Columbia Theological Seminary prides itself in the fact that Thornwell's theology and polity remain its tradition and its teaching. In whatever manner the Southern Presbyterian Church may have departed from the ideals he defined for it in its establishment in 1861, that denomination remains to an extent the lengthened shadow of James Henley Thornwell as the Scottish church is of John Knox.

### III. THORNWELL THE PHILOSOPHER

England and Europe in the 19th century produced extensive philosophical literature in which the typical concepts and principles of earlier periods were carefully reconsidered. This is equally true of 19th century philosophy in America. Philosophical thought here during this period followed two lines. The one was Emersonian transcendentalism. By and large this sort of thinking as a system of philosophy influenced only a select few of the New England aristocracy. The other line of development was a continuation of Scottish common sense realism, which remained, at least until about the opening of the 20th century, the basis of our

academic philosophy. It was not until near the close of the 19th century that any German philosophy was systematically presented in American college class-rooms. Before the late 1800's the name of Kant was rarely heard.

The American interpretation of Scottish common sense realism became widely accepted after the Civil War through the influence of James McCosh at Princeton and Noah Porter at Yale. Just how much influence this type of thought had prior to this time, scholarly research has yet to discover. It is known, however, that this influence upon American thought was considerable. John Witherspoon, who in 1768 came from Scotland to be President of the College of New Jersey, (now Princeton University), and his successor, Samuel Stanhope Smith, firmly implanted the tenets of Scottish realism as that institution's traditional and almost official philosophical doctrine. Levi Hedge, appointed by Harvard in 1810 as America's first full-time professor of philosophy, taught metaphysics and logic along lines indicated by Scottish realism. Francis Wayland, President and Professor of Moral and Intellectual Philosophy at Brown University from 1827 to 1855, followed Butler, Reid and Stewart in metaphysics, epistemology, psychology and ethics. In 1855 Wayland published the first edition of his *Moral Science*. This work passed through many revisions and editions. By 1868, 137,000 copies had been sold. The South gave it a warm reception.<sup>5</sup>

H. G. Townsend, in *Philosophical Ideas in the United States*, makes no mention of philosophical developments in the South. Nevertheless these developments are significant, particularly in relation to the influence of Scottish realism. The philosophical background of the Scotch-Irish immigrants who made their way down the Atlantic seaboard to settle was as important a contribution to the indigenous culture of this area as other elements in their heritage. The College of New Jersey, with its philosophical tradition of Scottish realism, was patronized by Southerners in such numbers that until the 1850's the institution was considered by North and South alike as Southern in its sympathies. Graduates

<sup>5</sup>Wm. E. Drake, "Higher Education in North Carolina before 1860," University of North Carolina Ph. D. thesis. Mss. Typescript collection, U. of N. C. Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

To Princeton South Carolinians gave  
\$40,000 to found Princeton Theol Sem  
before 1830 - I have I think

of Princeton were responsible for leadership in, and in many cases for the actual founding of, institutions of higher education in the South. The intellectual dominance of the Presbyterian denomination on the Atlantic seaboard up to the middle of the 19th century made prevalent the theology of Scottish Calvinism and with it the philosophy of Scottish realism.

"The men of the South have been men of action and seldom philosophers," wrote a prominent historian of the South, U. B. Phillips, in 1904.<sup>6</sup> More recent research is tending to modify this judgment. The early movement in this country for state-supported colleges and universities was fostered chiefly in the South. The higher type of Northern journalism received substantial patronage from the South. The general level of education may have been lower and information may have been less widely disseminated in the South than it was in the North, but the Old South did have its philosophical interests among "the chosen few." One of the intellectual interests it shared with the North was that of maintaining the academic philosophical traditions of this country,—Scottish realism.

Thornwell's first knowledge of Scottish realism did not come through the American interpretation which, as had been indicated, was prevalent in the North during his student days. His access to Scottish realism was more direct than that. Thornwell inherited a fondness for both things and ideas British. He spoke with hearty approval of "the sturdy common sense of Englishmen." Before he was twelve years of age he had read Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Soon afterward he discovered Dugald Stewart's *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* in the library of his benefactor. The reading of this work, he later confessed, first gave him an inclination to philosophy. Before he entered college, Thornwell had memorized long passages from Stewart, Jonathan Edwards and John Owen. During his college years, he read Berkeley, Hume, Swift, Brown and Shaftesbury, as well as Plato, Aristotle and Cicero in the original languages. Shortly after graduation from college he projected a

<sup>6</sup>U. B. Phillips, "Conservation and Progress in the Cotton Belt," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. iii, no. 1 (January, 1904), p. 2.

critical review of Sir James Mackintosh's *View of the Progress of Ethical Philosophy*.

The philosophical tradition of South Carolina College was set by its first president, the Rev. Jonathan Maxcy, D. D., a New England Baptist minister. He had been for ten years President of Brown University, his *alma mater*, and for two years President of Union College, Schenectady, New York, before coming to South Carolina. President Maxcy had a reputation as a scholar of metaphysics. Little is known of his philosophical position other than what can be inferred from the fact that he had had his training in a center of New England Scottish realism and from the fact that he had established a tradition in South Carolina College for that type of philosophical thought.

That tradition was modified markedly by Maxcy's successor, the colorful Thomas Cooper, M. D. Cooper was an Englishman, an Oxford-trained industrial chemist. Interested in social experiments, Cooper visited Paris for a first-hand observation of the French Revolution in 1792. Here he was greeted by Robespierre and other Jacobins. It has been conjectured that Cooper was a member of this party. In England he was related both by friendship and marital ties to Joseph Priestley, a Deist and a disciple of Bentham in ethical thought.

Cooper came to America with Priestley. Locating in Pennsylvania, he took up a political career, during the course of which he served two prison terms: one for slander of John Adams, President of the United States, and a second for conduct in office unbecoming a judge. After this he was Professor of Chemistry at Carlisle (later Dickinson) College and at the University of Pennsylvania. The University of New York conferred upon him the honorary degree of Doctor of Medicine. Thomas Jefferson wrote: "Cooper is acknowledged by every enlightened man who knows him, to be the greatest man in America, in the powers of mind, and in acquired information and that, without a single exception." In 1817 Jefferson had Cooper elected to the chair of chemistry in the newly organized University of Virginia, but Presbyterians of that state, under the persistent leadership of Dr. John Holt Rice, succeeded in preventing Cooper's installation at Charlottesville on grounds of his religious unorthodoxy and intolerance.

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It was at this point in his career, when he was sixty years of age, that Cooper was brought to South Carolina College. Within a year he was made president. Shortly thereafter the liberality of his religious views became apparent. A member in good standing in the Episcopal church at Columbia, he was commonly considered to hold Socinian or Unitarian views. Later he was interpreted as a Deist.

The criterion for religion, Cooper publicly stated, should be that "laid down by Christ himself, 'By their fruits shall ye know them.'" In ethical theory he tended toward the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham. He could find no excuse for metaphysics. In psychology Cooper, proposing a roughly formulated materialism based upon the premise that the brain-mass was adequate to account for all mental activities, concluded that the hypothesis of an immaterial soul was unnecessary. He was not altogether friendly to the institution of slavery. His political theories, which he publicized widely, have led to his being termed "the father of nullification in South Carolina." His intellectual abilities and attainments were impressive; his nature, benevolent. So frank and simple was he in his manners that, despite all those elements within his thought which tended to make him unpopular in South Carolina in the 1820's, the State maintained him as president of its college.

Thornwell admitted that these same qualities led to personal admiration for him. Early in Thornwell's college career a friend in writing to him referred to Cooper as "your idol." By 1831, however, Thornwell was so firmly convinced of the errors in Cooper's views that, when a resolution to support Cooper against the charges brought against him publicly was presented to the senior class, Thornwell led the movement to defeat it. There is some ground for considering Thornwell's acceptance of a teaching position at the college in 1838, after he had been ordained as a Presbyterian minister, as his effort to counteract the Cooper religious and philosophical influence at South Carolina College.

The apprehension with which Thornwell as a student came to view Cooper's philosophy may have led to his appreciation of Robert Henry. At any rate, Thornwell claimed that conversations with this man constituted the main benefit he enjoyed in college. Later he stated: "To him more than to any other man . . . we

are indebted for the direction of our own studies, and for whatsoever culture our mind has received."

Robert Henry, Charlestonian by birth, was educated in England. He received a Master of Arts degree from the University of Edinburgh in 1814. His studies in philosophy were pursued under the direction of Thomas Brown. Sir William Hamilton was his fellow-student. After a year of European travel and another of preaching in a Charleston French Calvinist church, Henry was elected Professor of Moral Philosophy and Logic at South Carolina College. That was in 1818. Until 1854, when he retired, with but one brief interruption he remained a professor at the college. The influence of this man and of his type of philosophy upon the traditions of the institution was obviously large.

With the exception of politics, in which field they were agreed, Cooper and Henry differed widely. Thornwell claimed that on every point in ethics, philosophy and religion they were poles apart. Henry devoted no little attention to metaphysics. In that subject he followed Thomas Brown. He criticized points made both by Reid and by Hamilton. Henry had great admiration for Berkeley. He said, Thornwell reported, that if given the alternative he would find it easier to maintain the non-existence of matter than the non-existence of mind. Although well versed in the German language, Henry knew little of German philosophy. He thought little of Kant and less of Kant's disciples.

Henry taught courses in the evidences of Christianity. These, Thornwell wrote, were not without their effect in saving the faith of men who were tempted by the heresy of Cooper. He also taught the history of philosophy. He was the first professor in the college to give logic a preeminent place in the curriculum. Thornwell gave Henry the credit, thus, for establishing a tradition in logical thinking for which South Carolinians were to become nationally famed.

In ethics Henry evolved a system of his own, one in which duties were regarded as arising out of the social nature of man and of God. Moral truth is discoverable by rational processes. Conscience is simply an emotional sanction for moral convictions. He also gave courses in political philosophy. Thornwell accorded

*was it through Francis  
Leiber who came to College in 1878*

him the distinction of being the first to introduce this subject into American collegiate instruction. Henry's background in this field was his study at Edinburgh of Adam Smith and Dugald Stewart.

It was, then, under the training of a man who had pursued studies with the great masters of Scottish realism that Thornwell formulated his own philosophical point of view. In the light of this background it is not particularly startling that he should have adopted the position of Scottish realism. Thornwell wrote of James McCosh's *The Method of Divine Government*: "We regard it as one of the first productions of the age." In 1890 Noah Porter wrote: Thornwell "published many able and important discussions on Philosophical Theology and Ethics." His disciple, colleague and successor at the theological seminary in Columbia, John L. Girardeau, wrote to B. M. Palmer, Thornwell's biographer, "You are correct . . . in assigning him, in the main, to the Scotch School of Philosophy."

Judging from the foot-note references to philosophical books in Thornwell's *Collected Writings*, he possessed a large number of major works in this field. Among the classical writers represented are: Aquinas, Aristotle, Bacon, Plato and Cicero. Thornwell referred to two German histories of philosophy, Brucker and Schwegler. He read Kant both in translation and in the original.

Thornwell's writings reveal little knowledge of American authors in philosophical subjects. He did refer to works by Jasper Adams, President of Charleston College, William Ellery Channing, Jonathan Edwards and James McCosh. He referred to three or four works by his contemporary, the French philosopher, Victor Cousin.

In the main, however, Thornwell's philosophical taste ran to English and Scotch thought. He possessed many volumes of both the Bampton and the Boyle Lectures. The names which appear most frequently in the four volumes of Thornwell's *Collected Writings* are: Berkeley, Butler (whose *Analogy* was termed a masterly treatise), Sir William Hamilton, Hume, Locke, John Stuart Mill, J. D. Morell, William Paley, Dugald Stewart, Jeremy Taylor, William Whewell and Richard Whately.

#### IV. THORNWELL THE THEOLOGIAN

Nineteenth century American Calvinistic theology may be viewed as having developed along two lines. One of these began with Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). By his acceptance of a Berkeleyan-like idealism, Edwards modified the strict Calvinism of New England Puritanism. Further qualifications were offered by Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803), Timothy Dwight (1752-1817), Nathaniel W. Taylor (1786-1858) and Charles G. Finney (1792-1875). This type of modified Calvinism was characteristic of Congregationalism and of more liberal Presbyterianism and during the 19th century was referred to as the New England or New School theology.

Calvinism as the original English Presbyterian-Puritans received it, claiming to have been more directly derived from the doctrines of Augustine and Calvin, was distinguished as Old School. Its characteristic emphases were placed upon the sovereignty of God and upon the guilt of inherited depravity. Charles (1797-1878) and A. A. Hodge (1823-1886) at Princeton Seminary and Robert J. Breckinridge (1800-1871) at Danville, Kentucky, Seminary, with Thornwell, were among the strongest advocates of Old School theology.

In 1801 a part of the Congregational Church and the Presbyterian Church consolidated forces under a Plan of Union with a view to the evangelization of the West. The followers of Princeton and the Old School theology became increasingly apprehensive of the Plan of Union. They were convinced that this association was injecting theological error into the Presbyterian Church. On the common grounds of theological apprehension and a conservative attitude toward slavery, the Old School combined forces North and South. By 1837 the Old School was sufficiently strong in the Assembly to demand and receive action whereby it was hoped New England opinion and influences would be largely removed from the Presbyterian Church. The following year the New School Presbyterian Church formed a separate organization.

There was a certain amount of New School influence in the South during this controversy. In general, however, this section was conservative in its theology, as it was in its social thought.



By 1836 the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, patron of the seminary, had become definitely Old School. Thornwell indicated in a letter to his wife written during his first meeting with that Synod in 1836 that the Old School party had determined to push action toward excising New Schoolism and that he would support the movement. In a similar letter, written in 1837 from the meeting of General Assembly after the excluding action had been taken, Thornwell expressed his conviction that the New School members were never constitutionally and regularly a part of the Church. The excising act he considered simply a legal statement of that fact.

As far as the South is concerned, the popularity of the conservative Old School theology may be viewed as a part of a larger movement of thought. The first four decades of the 19th century brought the beginnings of widespread criticism by Southerners of Jeffersonian liberalism in all fields of thought. The liberalizing modifications of Calvinism offered by the New School theology were unacceptable to most Southern Presbyterians. Some would have made Jonathan Edwards the infallible test of orthodoxy. Others were critical even of Edwards' Calvinistic variations. The latter increasingly returned to the touchstone of Calvin's works as interpreted by the early English Puritan thinkers and the continental reformed theologians of the Calvinistic sort. James H. Thornwell was the leader of the latter group. Such was his influence that as late as 1916 a representative of Columbia Seminary wrote: "The theology of Thornwell and Girardeau must always be the type for which this institution stands."<sup>7</sup>

In the footnotes of the four volumes of Thornwell's *Collected Writings* there are references to over 300 different books of a strictly theological nature. His library in this field must have been unusually extensive. One hundred and twenty-five of the titles cited may be considered of minor importance. A survey of the remaining titles is rather revealing in disclosing the sources of Thornwell's theology.

There are six titles in Biblical literature, Jahn, Delitzsch and

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<sup>7</sup>George A. Blackburn, ed., *The Life Work of John L. Girardeau* (Columbia, S. C.: The State Co. 1916), p. 139.

Leusden on the criticism of Old Testament language and literature, a Greek lexicon, Suicerus, and two New Testament commentaries, one in English by Lightfoot, the other in German by Eichhorn.

Thornwell's collection of writings of the Early Church fathers was extensive. The more familiar names are represented. There are also works by the lesser known figures such as Dionysius, Ambrose of Milan, Cyril of Jerusalem, Epiphanius, Rufinus and the Jewish scholar, Maimonides (from whom Thornwell derived his "contingency" argument for the existence of God). Of the medieval and modern Roman Catholic theologians, Thornwell had Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, eight works by Bellarmine (1542-1621), and Pascal's *Provincial Letters*. Concerning the Reformation and its theology, Thornwell had access to D'Aubigné's and Wallington's histories, Melancthon's *Opera Omnia*, as well as to Calvin's *Institutes* (his text-book in teaching systematic theology), *Commentaries* and *Tracts*.

It is significant that Thornwell made reference to a large number of writings by both English and Dutch Puritan thinkers: Stephen Charnock, Chillingworth, Cocceius, whose work in part led to the popularity of the Federal Calvinistic theology, De Moor, Richard Hooker, John Howe, Knapp (a Kantian Calvinist), John Owen, the most rigid of all Puritan thinkers, Franciscus Turretin (*Institutio Theologiæ Elencticæ*, a Calvinistic work used as a text at Princeton Seminary into the 20th century), and Van Mastricht.

Thornwell's collection of theological works by Englishmen who were his contemporaries was likewise large. These included six sets of Bampton Lectures. Henry L. Mansel's *Limits of Religious Thought*, on which Thornwell drew for a part of his epistemology, was among them. Aside from these, there were writings by Beckerstetch, Bishop Bull, Thomas Chalmers, Principal William Cunningham, South, R. C. Trench, Warburton, and Wardlaw.

The works which Thornwell employed in reference to the English Puritan movement consisted mainly of four volumes by John Milton. Thornwell prized *Paradise Lost*, from which he memorized long passages which he frequently used in the pulpit.

Apart from Kant's philosophical works, Thornwell seemed to have possessed nothing in the original from the German theologians

of the early 19th century. He mentioned several of them, such as Schleiermacher and Strauss. He had the works of the more evangelical German writers, Nitzsch and Max Müller. Development of the Tübingen school of theology had not yet delivered its full impact on American thought. Certain implications which this school was to follow out later, Thornwell anticipated. Collecting these implications of Hegelian and Kantian philosophies under the term rationalism, Thornwell fought it desperately. He considered it the most dangerous single form of infidelity.

In his writings Thornwell ignored American theological thought almost entirely. Apart from William Ellery Channing's *Works*, he seemed to have known nothing directly of New England liberal religious thought. He mentioned only four American thinkers aside from Channing. One of these was R. J. Breckinridge, his personal friend. Another was Charles Hodge, who openly debated with Thornwell at several General Assemblies from 1844 to 1861. A third was Jonathan Edwards. The fourth was Samuel J. Baird, whose *The First Adam and the Second* the New School considered hopelessly conservative. Thornwell viewed it as permeated with a dangerous type of error. During the early part of his life Thornwell read closely the religious journals published by Breckinridge. Later he followed Hodge's *Princeton Review*. Apart from these, however, although he was an editor of a religious quarterly, Thornwell seems to have ignored the extensive religious periodical literature published in the North during his lifetime.

An interesting part of his theological library was a set of nine catechisms, confessions of faith and reports of Church Councils, Catholic and Protestant, ancient, medieval and modern. In discussing the history of theological thought or that of church polity, he was accustomed to refer to them.

What has been stated concerning the adequacy of Thornwell's aptitude and equipment as a philosophical thinker may be applied with equal appropriateness to his ability as a theologian. Something of the extent of his available source materials has been noted. The indication is that he drew heavily upon Anglican and Scottish Calvinism as well as upon Calvin's own works as sources for his theology.

By the time he had entered into his active ministry Thornwell had adopted the Old School position in theology. He later referred to the action of General Assembly in 1837 as God delivering the Church from a long, dark and mournful bondage to Pelagian principles. A paper which he wrote for the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia in 1838 was adopted by that body as its confessed theological standard. Throughout the eighteen years of Thornwell's chaplaincy and professorship at South Carolina College his thinking was primarily theological in character. In 1856, in his inaugural address as Professor of Systematic Theology at Columbia Seminary, he referred to Calvinism as his heritage from a noble mother. He also spoke of his entrance into the teaching of theology as that event toward which Providence had guided him from his earliest religious life, through his fondness for philosophy, his college teaching and his ministerial career.

An historian of the Presbyterian Churches in America has ranked Thornwell as the third most influential systematic theologian in 19th century Presbyterianism. After Thornwell's death, one of his students wrote that he held no theological views which were not the common possessions of the Old School Church. Thornwell's theology is clearly not distinctive in its doctrines. The presentation of its contents, however, as another has written, is Thornwell's unique contribution to theology. By making the doctrine of justification central, he fused into a unity dogma and duty, theology and Christian ethics.<sup>8</sup>

Because of its tendency to speak in pious terms while undermining the foundations of Christianity, Thornwell viewed the type of theology presented by Schleiermacher as the new infidelity. "Rationalism," he prophesied, would become particularly dangerous in America. Its peculiar form of viciousness was a rejection of an objective revelation of God in Scriptures and an acceptance in its place of a man-made, pantheistic philosophy. The issue between the rationalists and Christians, he perceived, hinged on the question of the inspiration of the Scriptures and the authority of the Bible.

<sup>8</sup>R. E. Thompson, *History of the Presbyterian Churches* (New York: Scribner's, 1907), p. 145. Thornton Whaling in the *Centennial Addresses*, p. 25.

In 1850 Thornwell wrote a friend that this issue would prove the ground of some desperate battles. By 1853 he was writing that there should be a thoroughgoing exposure of transcendental philosophy and that he was becoming chary of all opinions which conflict with the individuality of God. This constitutes a basis for the claim that Thornwell's *Discourses on Truth*, 1855, was intended by its author to be a refutation of rationalism. Sir William Hamilton, in a note acknowledging the gift of a copy of this work, commended it for its philosophical acuteness. It is more likely, however, that Thornwell had in mind the series of articles he wrote in *The Southern Presbyterian Review* from 1849 to 1856. The articles seem to form a review of J. D. Morell's *The Philosophy of Religion*. But, as they stand in the third volume of Thornwell's *Collected Writings*, they constitute an indictment of theological rationalism. The arguments employed are, in general, of the sort that later Calvinism has felt must be used against Ritschlianism. The acuteness of Thornwell's logic as applied to theological subjects is apparent no more clearly in any of his writings than in these pages.

Protestant thinkers in 19th century America, like Thornwell, were unable to view without a strong emotional reaction the rapid growth of the Roman Catholic Church. The 1840's found the validity of the Roman Church a heatedly debated question in the Presbyterian Church. Anti-Catholicism became a national political issue when it was written into the platform of the American party. The group had some power in the 1850's, when it was popularly known as the "Know-Nothing" party.

Apart from certain restricted areas, the Catholic Church was never large in the Old South. Yet from 1839 to the Civil War the prophetic zeal for righteousness which, in the North, was expended upon American slavery received expression in the South by repeated and vitriolic attacks upon Catholicism. The bitterness of spirit is reflected in a letter dated January 15, 1853, written by A. T. McGill to his wife from Columbia Seminary where he had just gone as professor: "The attempt to fire the Seminary edifice, about which I wrote, was made by *Roman Catholics*. It is said by some, that their exasperation was excited by *my arrival* and con-

nection—it having been well known throughout the U. S. that I lectured against them at Pittsburgh in attacking O'Conner; . . . Others, with more correctness, say, that it was owing to the conduct of some students of the Seminary, on Christmas—who repeatedly laughed during their service; and behaved with so much impropriety, that the Priest publicly rebuked them.”<sup>9</sup>

Apart from the general spirit in the section in which he lived, there are three considerations which may have contributed to Thornwell's opposition to the Roman Catholic Church. Politically he was inclined to view with no little favor the general attitudes of the “Know-Nothing” party. His close friendship with R. J. Breckinridge brought him into intimate contact with one of this country's more virile opponents of Catholicism. In 1841, at Breckinridge's invitation, Thornwell wrote an article for publication attacking the validity of the Apocrypha. This led to a long series of bitterly worded open letters between Thornwell and Dr. A. P. Lynch of Charleston. Thornwell put his articles into book form in 1844. It was by this work that he first received national recognition as a writer. In 1845 the question of the validity of Catholic baptism was raised before the General Assembly. In the debate which ensued Thornwell had a prominent part. The Assembly's decision to deny the validity of such baptism brought forth a protest from Hodge's *Princeton Review*. The articles which were exchanged between Thornwell and Hodge during the following years have been included in the former's *Collected Writings*. Through these various polemical activities, Thornwell was led into original research of the source materials. This study convinced him, on theological and socio-political grounds, that “Romanism,” as he called it, in all its aspects, represented the perfect archetype of the Anti-Christ.

## V. THORNWELL THE SOCIAL THINKER

The developments in social life in his time could not but have had their effect upon Thornwell. The period was marked by sharply contrasting political views both in this country and in

<sup>9</sup>Mss. Collection, Presbyterian Historical Society Library, Philadelphia, Pa. Italics in the original.

Europe. France lost its republican form of government under Napoleon's sway. Italy became unified and released from the Pope's temporal control. Prussia bristled with militarism and was engaged in certain social experiments which were viewed with alarm in this country. Austria was in the process of modernization. Spain, having exiled her monarch, was forced to decide between a republic and a constitutional monarchy. In Asia, the doors of both China and Japan were opened for intercourse with the Western world powers. In India and elsewhere, Great Britain had begun to assume "the white man's burden." The era of imperialism had come of age.

Marked differences of opinion were also noted in the social thought of the United States during the period of 1830-1862. The differences concerning secession and slavery were the most apparent. But there were others. Legal prohibition of the liquor trade was one of the issues. This movement was begun as early as 1817. In 1846 the Maine legislature enacted the first statewide prohibition law. The question of universal suffrage, bi-sexual as well as bi-racial, was another popular topic of earnest discussion. Socialism as a system was prominently advocated by men like Horace Greeley. The New England transcendentalists pursued their "Brook Farm" experiment in social organization.

Meanwhile a great wall of public opinion was being erected between the North and the South. The South had its unique Negro problem. This involved a labor system which barred from the Southern states those new immigrants who were entering the North in great numbers throughout the 19th century. The North's reception of the immigrants had two effects. In the North it gave rise to dreams of an exploitive industrialism. The Southern counterpart was an ideal of Greek democracy. As the South watched these increases in Northern population, Southerners became ever more conscious of themselves as a numerical minority within the nation.

This consciousness impelled two great movements of political and social thought within the section. The first was the insistence upon the doctrine of states' rights. This development began in South Carolina in the late 1820's. It became a part of secession

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theory both in the 1850's and again in the 1860's. The second was the rejection of Jeffersonian equalitarianism. This was apparent by 1823, when the Reverend Richard Furman of South Carolina wrote that the Bible's Golden Rule implied a social stratification and was applicable only within the same social class. The same views were voiced in the 1850's by Dr. W. A. Smith of Hampden-Sidney College in Virginia. Elaborate social theories confidently stating that an aristocracy was the only society in which stability could be procured appeared in print as early as 1854.<sup>10</sup>

These differences in political and social theories made for strong sectional loyalties both in the South and in the North. Each section lived more and more to itself. The mutual intercourse in culture and thought which might have paralleled the advantage of economic trade was made impossible.

Thornwell made more of an effort to understand and appreciate the North than did other Southerners of his time. Nevertheless he confessed a great love for the South. His loyalty to South Carolina was almost a passion with him. This is reflected in much of his social thought.

He viewed with interest and with no little concern the conflicts in social theory both here and abroad. The issue as he conceived it centered in the question of the relation of man to society, of states to the individual and of the individual to the states. He was interested in the conflict, for out of it he thought the truth would emerge. He was concerned with it, for he felt the contestants could be grouped under two classes, Christians and Atheists. The progress of humanity was at stake. Yet he prophesied that the principles underlying Southern slavery would be vindicated. Despotism of masses, as he called communism, socialism and equalitarian democracy alike, would be defeated. The supremacy of a single will, as under a monarch or a dictatorship, would also be defeated. Representative republican government he thought, must be victorious.

During the period of 1830-1860 the most acute thinkers in the South were actively defending slavery as a system. Thornwell

<sup>10</sup>Geo. Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South*, 1854; Henry Hughes, *A Treatise of Sociology*, 1854.



was one of these. His contemporaries spoke of his thought as representative. They indicated their evaluation of his influence by his popular title of "the Calhoun of the Church."<sup>11</sup> It has been speculated that had he employed his influence against slavery, the Civil War might have been averted. Thornwell's social and political thought has a noteworthy historical significance and a continuing influence. Dr. L. C. LaMotte, in *Colored Light*, 1937, wrote that the Church today is facing much the same sort of social questions it did during Thornwell's day and that the principles stated by him should indicate the Church's present aim and plan of action.

On one occasion Thornwell seems to have impressed Calhoun with his learning in social and political matters. Thornwell's extant writings do not make it easy to establish the scope or nature of his studies along these lines. He referred to works in political philosophy by Brougham and by William Paley. His own social thought reflects something of the emphases set forth by Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. At one point in his writings, however, Thornwell expressed open contempt for some of these thinkers' lesser works. The one source-book in social and political theory which he heartily recommended was Francis Lieber's *Political Ethics*.

Like others of his strenuous times, Thornwell was not as scholarly in his social thinking as he was in other lines. Nevertheless he obviously attempted to make his social and political thought strictly consistent with his ethical and religious theories. It is this fact which makes the inclusion of this aspect of his thinking pertinent to any consideration of his religious thought.

## VI. THORNWELL THE PRESBYTERIAN DEFENDER

Controversy was one of the characteristics of 19th century American religious thought. It was a time of sharp conflicts between Protestants and Catholics and between the various Protestant denominations. Bitter contentions were prominent features in the crude revival meetings. In a more refined way controversy was a dominant element in the religious journalism of the day.

<sup>11</sup>L. G. Vander Velde, *The Presbyterian Church and the Federal Union, 1860-1869* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 1932), p. 30.

See his letter to Governor  
Manning about 1848 on the  
Public School System

There is no one aspect of Thornwell's religious thought more characteristic of him than a fondness for debate. Early in his ministry he enunciated the principle that a part of the Christian's duty was to resist with firmness every effort to corrupt the purity of the Church in doctrine and in discipline. In one of his last writings he affirmed that the genius of Presbyterianism was that it allowed for the discovery of truth by discussion without placing moral opprobrium upon persons who sincerely differ in their opinions. Throughout his life he proclaimed and practised the belief that discussion was God's appointed means for discovering error and removing it and for discovering truth and establishing it. Evidence alone, he insisted, should be the measure of assent.

Apart from his lectures in theology, most of Thornwell's writings are controversial. In no department of his thinking did he claim to be comprehensive. He stated as his aim in philosophy to say what is *not* rather than what *is* truth. The same may be said for much of his thought in other directions also. In philosophy he attacked the "rationalists" and the utilitarians. In theology he sought to counteract the theological implications of German idealism, Roman Catholicism, Pelagianism, Arminianism and Socinianism. In church polity he attempted to defend the two-kingdom theory of Church and State of the 16th century Puritans. In social philosophy he attacked the social contract theory of Hobbes, the racial pluralism of certain Southern social thinkers and the abolitionism of the North.

To state with some of Thornwell's warmest admirers that his religious thought has dominated the attitudes of Southern Presbyterians for the past hundred years may be too facile a generalization. Nevertheless to all who care to examine the records it will be clear that to him as to no other single thinker many Presbyterians of the South have gone back to get their philosophical, theological, social and political moorings. In that sense, therefore, it can be said that the religious thought of James Henley Thornwell has been normative during the past century for the theological and social development of a significant branch of American Presbyterianism.

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